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E-mail final to [REDACTED] by 3 p.m. today

Partnership: It's time for a sweet ride to end

By Ralph Doxey  
State Senator

For more than five years the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi has enjoyed a sweetheart of a ride at the expense of state taxpayers. Over this period of time \$100 million of taxpayers' money has been diverted to this private, non-profit organization created by former Attorney General Mike Moore and, until now, he has resisted every effort to shed a little light on just how sweet the ride has been.

Early on, with one-sided favoritism, a friendly Jackson County Chancery Court judge gave the Partnership \$20 million a year off the top of tobacco lawsuit proceeds without a motion being filed, without any notice to the parties involved and without a hearing – all contrary to accepted rules of court procedure. That raised my eyebrows. But it was only the beginning.

Mike's judge entertained delay after delay in the legal process, denying others with a clear interest in the case their day in court. It took the Governor, Division of Medicaid and State Treasurer on behalf of the Health Care Trust Fund pressing their case to the Mississippi Supreme Court to get her attention. This year's diversion of another \$20 million has been put on hold until the lawsuit can be heard.

In the meantime the Legislature's watchdog, the Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review, found the original court order granting state money to the Partnership was not in accordance with the law. The PEER report further found potential conflict with the former attorney general that has never been investigated.

While it is claimed that the Partnership is audited, no certified audit of the Partnership's use of the state's money has ever been provided, and there is no denying the waste and abuse of taxpayer dollars by the organization. For example, the Partnership spent \$20,000 on a newspaper ad that ran in newspapers across the state that had nothing to do with keeping youth from smoking. Instead, it was an ad praising the former attorney general for winning an award. The Partnership has also awarded monetary grants that are tinged with politics, such as the \$2.9 million given to the Legislative Black Caucus' foundation. These actions question whether the Partnership's priorities are more focused on politics than on stopping kids from smoking.

As I said, it's been a sweetheart of a ride, but the legislation sent to the Governor fails to correct the glaring deficiencies in the Partnership's operations.

Now even the former attorney general, who chairs the Partnership's Board, seems to agree that taxpayer money used by the Partnership must be appropriated by the Legislature and not unconstitutionally diverted by a Jackson County Chancery Court.

Governor Barbour has said the Legislature should appropriate the previously diverted \$20 million out of the Health Care Expendable Fund for the following purposes:

- Expand the school nurse program
- Maintain anti-tobacco education and advertising
- Expand cancer research, screening, education, and treatment
- Increase the state's support for the fight against drugs
- Ensure annual accountability of all funds

These appropriations should be reviewed each year by the Legislature to assess the effectiveness of the programs and to revisit the priorities in the context of the overall state budget.

Given that the former attorney general likely will lose the lawsuit and given that he has undoubtedly grown accustomed to directing funds to his political friends from a large bank account, it's no wonder he's now fighting to keep the Partnership in business. Unfortunately, he's turned vicious and vindictive.

But from the smokescreen produced by his rants and raves, one fact emerges: It's time for the Partnership's sweetheart ride to end.

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